

RYLE ON WILL

My aim in the present note is a very limited one. It is to examine just *one* of Ryle's arguments against a cartesian notion of will, namely his Infinite Regress Argument against this notion. The argument, as found in *The Concept of Mind*¹ and as I understand it, may be stated as follows : (1) It is said, directly or by implication, that not only a physical operation but also a mental operation may be voluntary or involuntary; voluntary, as issuing from volition; and involuntary, as issuing otherwise; (2) The question arises : Must not, then, volition, which is called a mental operation, be itself voluntary or involuntary ?; (3) Now, it would be absurd to say that volition is involuntary; and it would lead to infinite regress to say that volition is voluntary, because the volition which makes a given volition voluntary must itself be voluntary, and so on *ad infinitum*.

It is not at all difficult to see that there is at least one unmistakable basic similarity between this argument and Plato's own Infinite Regress Argument against Ideas, which he puts forth in his *Parmenides*.² Varying his illustration, this latter argument is simply stated thus : (i) Take the entire set of voluntary objects (actions or operations), a, b, c; they have the Idea of volition, V, common to them all; (ii) Take now, a, b, c, and V; will not there be *another* Idea of volition, V₁, common to them all ?; (iii) Take now a, b, c, V, and V₁; will not there be yet *another* Idea of volition, V₂, common to them all ? And so on *ad infinitum*. The unmistakable basic similarity between the two arguments, Ryle's and Plato's, is that they both, in one way or another, treat a universal as if it were itself a particular of the same sort of which it is the universal, they both in one way or another treat, for example, volition as if it were itself a particular voluntary action of which it is the universal.

Now, it is found that this basic similarity between the given arguments is also a mistake which they both commit. It is the category-mistake of, in one way or another, conflating a *universal* and a *particular* which falls under that universal, of predicating of a universal what can only be meaningfully predicted of a particular

falling under that universal, by virtue of the fact that it is a particular under that universal. Thus, for example, it is meaningful to ask what is common to what are called voluntary actions, or whether a certain action is voluntary or involuntary. But it is obviously not at all meaningful to ask what is common to *voluntary actions and volition*, which *is* what is common to *all* voluntary actions, to *everything* that is voluntary; nor, further, to ask whether *volition*, which *is* what is common to *all* that is voluntary, is itself *voluntary* or *involuntary*. Similarly, it is meaningful to ask what is common to what are called red objects, or whether a certain object is red or not red. But it is obviously not at all meaningful to ask what is common to *red objects and redness*, which *is* what is common to *all* red objects, to *everything* that is red; nor, further, to ask whether *redness*, which *is* what is common to *all* that is red, is itself *red* or *not red*. In short, it may be said that whatever *else* may or may not be meaningfully predicted of a universal *and* the particulars which fall under it, one can obviously never meaningfully predicate of a universal *that* which will change it into a particular falling under it, *that* which will make us treat it as if it were itself a particular of the same sort of which it is the universal. Both Ryle's and Plato's arguments in one way or another overlook this situation, and thus commit the category-mistake.

As the category-mistake consists in the confusion of different (logical) types, one may adopt a platonic pyramid of objects, from the highest universal down to the very particulars, as a convenient device to elucidate exactly when this mistake is committed. We may say that this mistake is committed when, in the pyramid, any class is confused with any other class, a class is confused with any of its sub-classes, a sub-class is confused with another sub-class under the same class, or when a sub-class is confused with the particulars falling under it. As an illustration, this mistake is committed when the mental is confused with the physical, the mental is confused with the voluntary, the voluntary is confused with the reflective, or when the voluntary is confused with the particular voluntary actions falling under it. Both Ryle's and Plato's arguments, as far as we have seen, commit the category-mistake by, in one way or another, confusing a class with the particulars falling under it.

It would be gathered from the foregoing that the possibility of constructing the above-mentioned defective argument as found in Ryle and Plato can be guarded against by presenting the argument in the form : 'The *entire* set of *particular* objects signified as S has the *common* character signified as P.' Both Ryle's and Plato's arguments make the mistake of in one way or another treating P as if it were not P but a member of S.

It should also be pointed out here that Ryle's mode of reasoning, like that of Plato, would indeed be the *reductio ad absurdum* of *all* predication. For not only must we then ask whether volition is itself voluntary, but, *mutatis mutandis*, also whether reflection is itself reflective, emotion itself emotive, and so on. It is gratifying to note that far from being necessary, such a question is quite impossible, thanks to the category-mistake involved.

Department of Philosophy,
St. Stephen's College,
Delhi.

R. K. Gupta

NOTES

1. Penguin Books, 1966 reprint, pp. 65-66.
2. *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by B. Jowett, Random House, p. 132.

THE MONIST

An International Quarterly Journal of
General Philosophical Inquiry

Founded 1888 by Edward C. Hegeler

Editor, Eugene FREEMAN

Editorial Board : William P. Alston, Monroe C. Beardsley, Lewis White Beck, William A. Earel, Dagfinn Follesdal, William Frankena, Maurice Mandelbaum, R. Barcan Marcus, Richard Martin, Mary Mothersill, Joseph Owens, Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, Wilfrid Sellars, John E. Smith, Richard Wasserstrom.

Managing Editor, Ann FREEMAN

Each Issue is Limited to Articles on a Single General Topic. Communicate with the Editor in advance for Special Instructions. Papers should be 4000-8000 words in length and must be submitted in duplicate nine months prior to the scheduled publication of the issue, accompanied by return postage.

SCHEDULED PUBLICATION DATES :

Vol. 60, No. 1 Jan., 1977 Bioethics and Social Responsibility

Vol. 60, No. 2 Apr., 1977 Philosophy and Religion in the Nineteenth Century.

Vol. 60, No. 3 July, 1977 New Directions in Semantics

Vol. 60, No. 4 Oct., 1977 Historicism and Epistemology

Vol. 61, No. 1 Jan., 1978 Conceptions of the Self : East & West

Vol. 61, No. 2 Apr., 1978 The Philosophy of Thomas Reid

Vol. 61, No. 3 July, 1978 Nominalism, Past and Present

Vol. 61, No. 4 Oct., 1978 The Philosophy and Psychology of Cognition

Editorial Office : Box 1908, Los Gatos, California 95030

Business Office : Box 600, La Salle, Illinois 61301

Subscription Rates : United States : Annual (4 issues) ;
Institutions \$18.00; Individuals, \$12.00. Single Copies :
\$4.50. Foreign postage : Add 25 cents to single copy rate or
\$1.00 to subscription rate.